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Simon de Montfort 1265 — 1965

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OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

SIMON DE MONTFORT

SIMON DE MONTFORT has always attracted more attention and controversy than any other medieval English magnate. Since his death seven hundred years ago he has had his critics and his admirers, and his reputation has oscillated between the heights of adulation and the depths of denigration. Many past views of his actions may now seem anachronistic, and others are demonstrably false. Yet an account of them is more than just a catalogue of dead or dying errors.

The vicissitudes of Simon's posthumous reputation are a microcosm of much wider trends in the writing of history in our country. For Simon's career, perhaps more than that of any other figure from that remote period, has remained surprisingly topical ever since. To later generations his contest with King Henry III seemed to epitomize either the glories of the perennial struggle for liberty and democracy, or the dangers of personal dictatorship. But equally important, Simon's name was associated with what has been long felt to be a critical period in the early history of our most distinctive and cherished institution: Parliament. To a very special degree, therefore, the successive judgements on Simon's career reflect the changing pattern of English politics and opinion. Each age has placed him in a setting that corresponds with contemporary assumptions and answers to contemporary political desires. However misleading many past discussions of his role may seem to have been, they have served to delineate the main issues in his career and have produced a mass of information which is indispensable to our understanding of his life and times. The advance in comprehension has not been steady and unbroken. Nevertheless, the contrast between the standard modern biography by Charles Bémont and the works of earlier writers is a measure of the transformation that has occurred in Montfortian studies.

I

When Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, was defeated and killed by the supporters of Henry III at the battle of Evesham on 4th August, 1265, his body was dismembered by the exultant

loyalists and later his bewildered followers were dispossessed of their lands. But the triumph of the earl's opponents did not consign his reputation to oblivion. The supposed manner of his life had already inspired popular veneration. The earl was known to be punctilious in his religious observances and on terms of close friendship with many leading clerics. His death released a flood of miracles which conclusively demonstrated to his former followers that his outwardly exemplary life was a true expression of his inner personality.

The first miracle was believed to have occurred at the very moment of Simon's death. A violent summer thunderstorm broke over the battlefield and the accompanying darkness was interpreted by the earl's sympathizers as a manifestation of divine approval. Nor was it long before Evesham Abbey, whose monks had buried Simon's mutilated remains near the high altar, became a centre of pilgrimage where marvels were worked by the earl's intervention. The number of miracles performed mounted so rapidly that some of the king's advisers became alarmed. In October, 1266, the drafters of the Dictum of Kenilworth urged the papal legate then in England to prevent, by ecclesiastical censure, Simon de Montfort from being regarded as a saint or just man, and the vain and foolish miracles attributed to him from being published abroad. The king was requested to support the legate's action by threat of corporal punishment. These alarmed injunctions are remarkable testimony to popular feeling in Simon's favour more than a year after his death. Equally significant is the fact that the popular canonization of the earl was so strong in its early stages that it defied all efforts by the king and the legate to suppress it. According to a highly circumstantial list made by a monk of Evesham, over two hundred miracles attributed to Simon's intervention had occurred within thirteen years of his death. All kinds of cures were effected: convulsions, blindness, dumbness, even death itself gave way before Simon's power. Domestic animals as well as human beings shared in the benefits worked by the earl's relics. Despite the official condemnation of Simon by the Church, the 'beneficiaries' included no fewer than forty clerics.

By the late 1270's the popular veneration for Simon was noticeably slackening. But from the beginning, mingled with the popular canonization, had been a much more powerful

impulse to the survival of Simon's reputation. This was the veneration of the earl as a political hero – a martyr for the liberties of the realm. The contemporary and near-contemporary chronicles were almost unanimous in describing Simon's devotion to justice and the Church, and conveying a feeling of divine approval for the anti-royal forces. The chronicle of Melrose, for instance, asserted that 'no one in his right mind ought to censure Simon or call him by the name of traitor. For he was not a traitor, but a most devoted adherent and faithful protector of the Church of God in England, a shield and defender of the kingdom of England.'

The importance of these eulogies for the later reputation of Simon was twofold. In the first place, they handed down, at least into the fourteenth century, a tradition of Simon as the embodiment of justice. In the so-called Monk of Malmesbury's life of Edward II, finished about 1325, the author, having asserted that the king only submitted to the Ordinances after being reminded of the threat of a new civil war like that under Henry III, went on to praise Simon as 'that noble man ... [who] ... laid down his life in the cause of justice'. Secondly, the chroniclers transmitted to more modern times a fund of overwhelmingly sympathetic evidence about Simon. The favourable picture which they drew of him could be ignored by only the most prejudiced of his detractors. The importance of this material was increased still further by the comparative inaccessibility for several centuries of the government records on which modern accounts are largely based.

These factors help to explain why the first detailed estimates of Simon's life which began to appear in print in the second half of the sixteenth century presented such a remarkably favourable picture of his character though denying his importance. Holinshed, for example, depicts the earl as 'indowed with such vertue, good counsell, courteous discretion, and other amiable qualities, that he was highly favoured as was supposed, both of God and man'. Nevertheless, the playwrights of Elizabethan England totally ignored the dramatic possibilities of his career. This is puzzling, though no more perplexing than the fact that his life has never been adequately portrayed on the stage. Perhaps this neglect can be partly explained in purely literary terms. Power and ambition, it is often claimed, are only artistically interesting when they are in

decline. If so, Simon's record of fluctuating success followed by sudden and calamitous defeat gave little scope to the dramatist. It is more likely, however, that it was political objections that made his life an unrewarding subject to the Elizabethan playwright. By his resort to rebellion he contravened the Tudor doctrines that legitimate rulers must be obeyed and that civil war was amongst the worst of all evils.

The deepening political conflicts of the seventeenth century stimulated interest in the events of Simon's life, though the results were far from advantageous to his reputation. This intensified study of the thirteenth century partly reflects the contemporary preoccupation with history as a subject which could teach what to imitate and what to avoid. The other contributory factor was the interest in the early history of parliament which arose naturally from a recognition of the institution's crucial part in contemporary conflicts. In both cases, the needs of political propaganda determined the direction and character of the research, and the interpretations which emerged were often monuments of historical ingenuity.

The view that the disputes between king and barons in the mid-thirteenth century could be made to yield useful political lessons was first expounded by Sir Robert Cotton. His study of the reign of Henry III, published two years after the accession of Charles I, stressed the harmful effects of the king's reliance on favourites. But neither Cotton nor any other writer of the period went on to praise Simon for leading the opposition. They were all apprehensive of the dangers of disorder and of courting royal disapproval by seeming to condone rebellion. Indeed, Cotton emphasized the perils of the rise to power of a man like Simon who claimed his object was nothing but 'order of the State' but who was bound to start a train of events which would end disastrously. Or, as he put it more picturesquely: 'We must beware of running down steepe hills, with weighty bodies, they once in motion . . . stoppes are not then voluntary . . .'

The outbreak of the Civil War and the rise of Cromwell gave royalist writers, so they thought, a new insight into the significance of Simon's actions. His career was now utilized to denounce the dangers of dictatorship. Edward Chamberlayne used considerable ingenuity to point parallels between Simon's rebellion and the current civil war. The earl was blamed in the

same way and for the same reasons as Cromwell. To Chamberlayne, the main cause of the Barons' War was Henry's neglect of government and the recourse by his ministers to monopolies, patents, and illegal taxation. Simon posed as a liberator, but his real motive was 'to pull downe Monarchicall government, and set up a factious Oligarchy'. Amongst the political lessons which the author drew from his study of Simon's rebellion was his advice to subjects not to be 'misled into disloyalty, by any ambitious, unquiet, cunning Spirits, upon what pretences soever, and when Liberty, Religion, or any publique good is pretended, then most of all to suspect their private ends'. This charge of hypocrisy became a powerful weapon in the hands of Simon's critics in the next century.

The results of the growing curiosity about the early history of parliament, which constituted another important strand in seventeenth-century historical writing, were no more favourable to Simon's reputation than had been the interest in the supposed political parallels between the two ages. The major obstacle to the investigation of Simon's part in the growth of the Commons was the determination of opponents of the Stuarts to show that parliament, including the Commons, was an extremely ancient body and that the rights of Englishmen were independent of royal authority. Sir Edward Coke, for example, was not alone in believing that parliament had existed even in British times. There was thus little place for events as late as the parliaments of 1264-65, and so what later generations were to see as Simon's claim to be the founder of the Commons was largely ignored in the first two-thirds of the seventeenth century.

The situation changed dramatically in the 1680's. The Montfortian parliament of 1265 now became the centre of a fierce controversy between royalists who wished to see in it the origin of the Commons and others who wanted to maintain the old idea of immemorial right. Robert Brady, the leading royalist protagonist, possessed a remarkable historical sense, sharpened by the special needs of political controversy. He argued, with great learning, that knights had not been called to parliament until Simon did so after Lewes. Paradoxically, Simon's reputation gained nothing from this advance. For one thing, Brady minimized the importance of the earl's decision by making it only one step in an intermittent development. There

was no question, he thought, of the third estate being called into existence by conscious design. Secondly, Brady's purpose was propagandist. As he freely admitted, he was no friend of either Simon or parliament. His aim was to prove the essential nature of royal power by showing that the Commons owed its creation to a pre-existent authority. This political partisanship led to disaster, for Brady took office under James II as a keeper of the Tower records and was discredited along with his views when the king was overthrown in 1688.

The historical controversies of the seventeenth century opened up the guiding lines of subsequent research into Simon's life. They had stimulated interest in his character and motives, and focussed attention on his parliaments. The cumulative effect, however, had been to lower the earl's reputation. His motives had been called in question and his intervention in English politics had been portrayed as disastrous. The promising line of research into Simon's parliamentary activities had been blighted by a political revolution. It was not to be taken up again for another century. In the eighteenth century, with the idea of an immemorial House of Commons become almost an article of faith, Simon's reputation sank to new depths. One of the few historians who resisted the general tendency was Paul de Rapin, a Huguenot refugee who settled in England in 1686. His assessment of Simon, intended to enlighten uninvolved Continental audiences, was detached and thoughtful. He drew attention to the earl's inconsistency in complaining of Henry's unrestrained power, and then taking a monopoly of authority after 1264. Nevertheless, he admitted that not enough was known about Simon's motives to say whether his aims were honest or hypocritical.

Such reflective strictures were untypical. By most writers repudiation was total. The earl's leading critic was Thomas Carte, whose work set the tone for nearly two generations. Carte, a non-juror and Jacobite, produced a devastating condemnation of Simon's character and political activities. His claim to be the founder of the Commons was dismissed in a sentence: 'It is in vain to expect the discovery of any part of the ancient constitution of parliaments, from an assembly, convened by the arbitrary will of a rebel; modelled so as might best serve his purposes, and composed only of his partisans...' Carte saw Simon's rebellion as a diabolical conspiracy led by

an over-ambitious man. Simon 'had too much ambition for a subject' and his aim was 'either to make the king his slave, and govern the realm in his name, or else to usurp the throne'. After asserting the earl's rapacity and violence, Carte characterized him in richly evocative language. 'He was bold, resolute, enterprising and superior to most of the age in the art of war; insinuating, artful, and persuasive; his head furnished him with the talents necessary to form and time the most proper measures for his purposes, and an intrepid heart supplied him with vigour in their execution; so that with these advantages he was perfectly qualified to be the head of a turbulent faction, which designed to overturn the government.' Carte's passionate diatribe may seem strange to those who take the trouble to turn back to his introduction where he writes 'I have spared no labour in the search of truth in all cases... I am conscious of no bias on my mind, nor can I imagine when the most prejudiced persons can suspect me of any; unless perhaps in my character of Stephen...' The delusions of historians about their own impartiality are perennial.

Most of Carte's views were shared by the cool and sceptical Hume. He censured Simon's cynicism, avarice, ingratitude, and ambition. The earl, he contended, had exaggerated Henry III's incapacity and oppression in order to seize power. His pretensions to piety were hypocritical. Although the parliament of January, 1265, had been organized 'on a more democratical basis' than any before it, Simon's achievement was merely to anticipate by a few years a development that social changes had already foreshadowed. Yet perceiving the paradox of an alien leading a successful rebellion against the king's foreign advisers, Hume was prepared to acknowledge Simon's great military and political qualities. A better king than Henry, he thought, might have been able to divert his talents into more constructive channels. Hume's sensitive analysis makes it all the more a matter for regret that Gibbon did not write the account of the Barons' War that he had at one time intended.

The great changes in English political life which occurred in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century had far-reaching results for Simon's languishing reputation. As England avoided revolution and successfully adjusted herself to the coming of democracy, a new view of the past, deeply coloured by contemporary experience, took shape. Nineteenth-century historians, who

equated parliament with democracy, began to see the struggle in which Simon had taken part as a formative period in the making of the constitution. They totally rejected the eighteenth-century view which, as one of them complained, had portrayed Simon's rebellion 'as the strife of turbulent nobles, who, in the absence of foreign warfare, employed themselves in getting up a few contests at home'. Far from being vicious and lacking in fixed principle, Simon was the leading radical of his day, whose fame as a creative statesman could rival his achievements as a soldier. Moreover, later in the century, the earl was presented not only as an early upholder of democracy and the people's rights, but as the personification of the middle class virtues that appealed to an increasingly large and influential element of Victorian society.

The first signs of a changed attitude to Simon's career occurred at the very end of the eighteenth century in the works of local historians. The biographical account of Simon by Sambrook Nicholas Russell was both detailed and sympathetic; but its approach was discursive and no very clear picture of Simon's character emerges. William Lee, on the other hand, full of local Lewes patriotism, made his avowed aim the vindication of the earl's fame. In addition to claiming that Simon struggled to defend the oppressed poor, he asserted that his parliamentary assemblies 'gave every freeman . . . that mediate influence in legislation which every citizen ought to enjoy'.

Significant though these accounts are as foretastes of things to come, it was not until 1830 that the first important blow was struck in Simon's favour. It was delivered by Sir James Mackintosh, M.P., who, though his old enthusiasm for the French Revolution had vanished, remained a radical in politics and had strenuously opposed the repressive legislation after 1815. Mackintosh, whose views played a notable part in shaping the prevailing attitude of the next generation, concentrated on Earl Simon's place in parliamentary history. He admitted that he had 'scarcely any positive information on the subject' but he nevertheless concluded enthusiastically that Simon 'unknowingly determined that England was to be a free country'. Mackintosh believed that Simon probably attributed little importance to his inclusion of knights and burgesses in the parliament of 1265. None the less, later writers tended to

remember only his assertion that Simon's decision was 'the practical discovery of popular representation.'

Fourteen years later, the Sussex historian, W. H. Blaauw, added good intentions to good deeds. Inspired by a glimpse of the battlefield at Lewes, he wrote the only separate study of the Barons' War we have. In some of its detailed information, notably the use of the manuscript letters of Adam Marsh, Simon's spiritual adviser, it represented a genuine advance upon all previous accounts of the subject. Nevertheless, Blaauw employed the evidence of Simon's cordial relations with many of the leading clerics of his day merely to demonstrate that the earl was a man of integrity. It did not occur to him to inquire, as later writers did, how far Simon's political outlook was determined by these friendships. Blaauw envisaged the struggle between Simon and Henry III as a war of principle, a contest between 'the conflicting claims of royal prerogative and of popular control', in which Simon personified the popular cause. Indeed, the earl could be compared to George Washington as 'another founder of a free constitution'. Under Simon's guidance 'English freedom rose to so vigorous a manhood' that the principles survived his downfall and 'to this day we are enjoying the full maturity of their effects'. The author's complacency reflects the general contentment of the middle classes after the passing of the first Reform Bill. The emerging conception of Simon as a popular Victorian statesman still lacked one important element: a loyal wife and happy family life. Eleanor de Montfort had received scant attention except from those hostile writers who repeated the scurrilous story that Simon seduced her as part of his unscrupulous climb to power. It was Mrs. Mary Everett Green's achievement to add some degree of domesticity to the picture. In her opinion, Eleanor, though shrewish, matured into a devoted wife and mother. In spite of its inauspicious beginning, no hint of scandal disturbed her married life.

The picture of Simon as a popular statesman and Victorian worthy was completed by W. W. Shirley. From his pen in 1866 came not only a valuable collection of original materials for the reign of Henry III, but an incisive survey of Simon's newly acquired reputation. Shirley considered that Simon, in order to offset the power of the crown, was compelled to seek the help of the knights and burgesses by summoning them to parliament.

'It was this necessity,' he argued, 'which induced what in modern language we might call a great parliamentary reform.' Though Shirley doubted Simon's democratic purpose, he made the earl acceptable to the Victorian public: '... over the coarse ignorance and impure rudeness of the old feudal manners he bore himself in calm, gentle superiority, cultivated, refined and unsullied, the very model of an English gentleman'.

These same attributes were lauded by the German historian Reinhold Pauli when he produced the first full-length biography of Simon in 1867. This book was one fruit of a love for British institutions which had developed during a stay in our country from 1847 to 1855. To the task of biographer Pauli brought an enthusiasm for the democracy which he thought he saw foreshadowed in Simon's activities. Pauli had learnt from the improved historical method of Ranke, his former teacher, whom he greatly admired and to whom he dedicated his book. His volume made effective use of the increasing body of original material in print, and struck a balance between chronicles and record sources. To Pauli, Simon's manners and behaviour, and therefore his intentions, were beyond reproach. He was the champion of the oppressed classes, 'a disinterested benefactor of the people' who had inspired the baronial revolution of 1258. His decision to call knights and burgesses to parliament in 1265 was not the desperate subterfuge of an ungrateful rebel. On the contrary, it was a 'stroke of daring genius' which qualified him for the honour bestowed on him in the book's sub-title 'Creator of the House of Commons'.

In 1876, when a revised version of Pauli's book was translated into English, Harriet Martineau, the Victorian radical, provided an enthusiastic introduction. Pauli's view of Simon seemed to her 'thoroughly acceptable'. 'There will surely be no room left', she contended, 'for any generation henceforth to ask, as our grandfathers too often did - "*Was Simon de Montfort a great and good man?*"' Her confidence must have seemed all the more justified by the happy coincidence that, within the twelvemonth, two other books were published which helped to raise Simon's reputation still higher. 'To promote the good of the people, to introduce order into the affairs of the Church, to withstand the oppression of Pope and King' - these were the earl's aims according to Mandell Creighton, the future bishop of London and first editor of the English Historical

Review, author of the earliest specifically popular biography of Simon. Creighton argued that the clerics who were foremost in demanding ecclesiastical and social reform supported the earl not merely from personal friendship but because they 'recognized in Simon a fellow worker'. The credit Simon deserved in connection with the origin of the Commons 'will be seen from a survey of the facts of the case', wrote Creighton with what we are accustomed to think typical Victorian optimism. According to Creighton, although the parliament of 1265 involved no new principle and was basically the gathering of the earl's supporters, Simon still deserved credit as the first man who recognized 'that the representation of all classes in the State was necessary to form a complete Parliament'. The only criticism of his hero that he would allow himself was a complaint at his temper and impatience, but even these failings he excused: they arose from Simon's passionate eagerness that others 'should recognize the nobility of his motives'.

The continued enhancement of Simon's reputation owed much to William Stubbs. His fresh estimate of the earl's character and intentions was the more effective because of its massive erudition and freedom from extravagant eulogy. To Stubbs, Simon's quarrel with Henry III represented part of that struggle between nation and crown which characterized English history in the thirteenth century. In assessing the earl's own acts and policies Stubbs's praise was not unmingled with criticism. Stubbs contended that had he lived Simon might have grasped the throne itself and abandoned his parliamentary experiments, which in any case 'wore very much the form of an occasional or party expedient'. Nevertheless, Simon's virtues outweighed his faults and limitations. He was a great and good man. His constructive genius and genuine enthusiasm for political reform were both displayed in the summoning of representatives to the parliament of January, 1265. This decision made him 'one of the first to see the uses and the glories' of representative government. He was, as Stubbs elsewhere described him, a 'buccaneering old Gladstone'.

Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, writers followed the lead given by Pauli, Creighton, and especially Stubbs. Two made important and distinctive contributions. Sir George Prothero's biography relied heavily on Pauli and Stubbs for general interpretation, but made a conscientious

C. W. Anderson
Monfort Family

effort to go back to the original sources. Prothero's most novel idea was that the *Forma Regiminis* of 1264 was Simon's principal achievement. It set up, he contended, a purely electoral system of government based on the will of the community. This disproved the idea that the earl's actions were a cover for selfish ambitions. In comparison, Simon's parliamentary experiments, though demonstrating his ingenuity, did not represent a break with past traditions. Even so, the idea of giving *separate* representation to knights and burgesses was a 'remarkable piece of political insight', and Prothero was content to accept that, in the making of the House of Commons, Simon's contribution was greater than that of any other individual.

It was not until 1884 that the mass of scholarly opinion and records in print was brought into clear focus. Charles Bémont's study has been described as 'a model of what a biography of a medieval statesman should be'. Certainly no previous writer had done so much to explain Simon's personality, or to survey the earl's whole activity as soldier, royal official, and leader of the baronial opposition. When the author rewrote his book, incorporating much new material for the English edition of 1930, all previous biographies of the earl were virtually superseded. One of Bémont's most significant contributions was to approach the problems of Simon's career from a continental standpoint and to emphasize the importance of his European interests and his years in Gascony in moulding his outlook. Throughout his book Bémont was more restrained in his handling of motive than some of his immediate predecessors. Even so, he maintained that although Simon's opposition to the king sprang originally from frustrated ambition, 'later it drew its inspiration from a nobler passion, regard for the public weal'. Simon's initiative had helped to found the Commons, and his efforts had served the cause of political liberty.

The historians' view of Simon as a liberal statesman has been carried down into our own time and further refined in the writings of Professors E. F. Jacob and R. F. Treharne. Earl Simon is pictured by Professor Jacob as representative of 'constructive aristocracy': a blend of the best political ideas of his time and a realization of the 'possibilities of self-government latent in English local institutions'. The earl sympathized with the desire of the middle order of society for the protection provided by good administration. This was why during his

period of personal rule Simon could command the voluntary support of a substantial number of knights not bound to him by ties of feudal allegiance.

Professor Treharne's views, first put forward in his carefully documented study of the baronial plan of reform over thirty years ago, have been developed and repeated in a number of articles, the most brilliant and persuasive being his Raleigh Lecture in 1954. All these studies, like those of Professor Jacob, are based on a thorough mastery of the administrative records which have now completely displaced the chronicles as the main sources for the period. There is much in Professor Treharne's interpretation that Victorian historians would have recognized and approved. His view of Simon and the reform movement of 1258 is unashamedly idealistic. He writes of the magnates as altruists who brought in the first political revolution in English history. It was 'a genuine enterprise of practical idealism'. Simon, a man of outstanding ability and unusually wide interests, was deeply influenced by his friendship with Bishop Grosseteste. The bishop's idealism helped to colour, though it did not determine, the earl's vision of a 'limited monarchy ruling with the advice of an elected council'. In 1258 Simon was merely one of a number of magnates who desired far-reaching reforms. His emergence as undisputed leader of the reformers did not occur until 1263. This view does not detract from Simon's importance; on the contrary, it heightens its dramatic impact. The magnates were collectively responsible for initiating the baronial plan of reform, while Simon is seen as maintaining and developing the ideas that the other barons had lamely deserted. His rise to leadership was a result of his dedication to the cause of reform and his moral ascendancy over his fellow barons. Those who opposed him were reactionaries prompted, for the most part, by selfish class motives. Simon's strenuous efforts to come to terms with his opponents conclusively demonstrated his lack of overriding personal ambition. Perhaps he did not envisage knights and burgesses as integral parts of parliament, but, maintains Professor Treharne, his breadth of vision is revealed by his desire to see parliament made a regular part of the governmental machinery.

For over thirty years Professor Treharne has vigorously and eloquently defended this reading of Simon's character and

significance. His latest study is a pungent restatement of his views and answer to his critics. His steadfastness in this cause appropriately echoes the identical quality he greatly admires in Earl Simon, but it has served to emphasize the cleavage in interpretation which has opened up between himself and other scholars with like views on the one hand, and many fellow historians working in the field of thirteenth-century English history on the other. If we probe into the causes of the decline in Simon's reputation in this century, we will find, not unexpectedly, that an important part has been played by specific criticisms of the earl's character and aims.

'One of the loneliest and most disconcerting figures in our history' is the verdict on Simon by Sir Maurice Powicke in his exhaustive account of politics in the reign of Henry III. He pictures him as a fanatical, austere, and devout baron who became a disciple of Grosseteste and was fired by his vision of a remodelled England. It was Simon, he contends, who played the decisive part in drawing up the Provisions of Oxford, in effect England's first written constitution. Later, the maintenance of his oath to defend the Provisions became the controlling passion in his life. He was supported by the bulk of the people, clergy and laity alike, because they had gained practical advantages from the reform programme. Nevertheless, Simon's rigid mind and arrogant outlook played a great part in wrecking baronial unity. His decision to include knights and burgesses in the parliament of January, 1265, was not part of a plan to democratize government. It sprang from a desire to give recognition to those communities which had sent their forces to defend England from invasion in the previous year. To Sir Maurice, Simon was not a constitutionalist born out of his time, but a 'dark force' responsible for distorting and, finally, destroying the baronial plan of reform.

Simon's latest biographer, Mrs. Margaret Labarge, concentrates on the personal rather than constitutional features of his career. She sees him as a man of paradox: proud, obstinate, harsh, yet possessed of great ability and 'able to influence and even revolutionize his times'. She contends that Simon did not become the king's uncompromising opponent until as late as 1261. Moreover, she is an unsparing critic of the earl's weaknesses. She argues that his support for the Provisions involved a very narrow conception of duty, but that his worst fault was

his persistent angling for personal advantage. She does indeed seem to imply that Simon's personal grievances against Henry, arising out of his wife's financial and territorial claims, explain his subsequent leadership of a rebellion against the king.

Trends in recent work on thirteenth-century England have accelerated the decline in Simon's reputation. In particular, a startling transformation has occurred in views on the early history of parliament. The attendance of the representative element at parliamentary meetings is seen to have been of restricted consequence and a reflection of purely royal needs. Increasing emphasis on the dominant role of the crown in the growth of parliament is symptomatic of another, more fundamental, change of attitude which is damaging to Simon's standing. The claim that the activities of the baronage, and its leaders like Simon, were the means of constitutional advance has been rejected. Instead, the monarchy is now depicted as fulfilling the magnates' former function as the instrument of political development.

II

The cumulative effect of these specific criticisms and general reorientations of view has been to modify profoundly, though not entirely to overthrow, the verdict on Simon de Montfort which the twentieth century inherited from Victorian times. Yet one point stands out from the judgements on Simon delivered over the last seven hundred years: no one has ever questioned the earl's ability. It has been recognized and extolled by all contemporaries and by historians so differently placed in time and circumstance as Holinshed, Carte, Stubbs, Powicke, and Treharne. Simon impresses, even dazzles, by his versatility. He was equally at home planning a military campaign, conversing with the spiritual leaders of the day, and handling the complex business of province and kingdom. Nor are some of his personal qualities in question. His enormous energy, his fearlessness, his hot temper, and his contempt for vacillation and half-measures are freely acknowledged by

admirers and critics alike. Simon was not an amiable man, but he possessed a personality of magnetic power.

The crucial problems of his career lie in finding answers to two basic questions:

- (a) How and why did Simon, who commenced his public career in England as a vilified foreigner, succeed in emerging ultimately as the leader of a well-supported rebellion against the king?
- (b) What was the significance of Simon's part in English politics during the period of baronial reform and rebellion?

In exploring these problems and attempting a new assessment of Simon's political career, it will come as no surprise to find the earl open to criticism at precisely the points where Victorian historians believed him least vulnerable. For we have learnt to be wary of over-intellectualizing medieval politics and are no longer preoccupied with finding exact dates for the origins of political institutions.

(a)

Simon had an unenviable reputation during the first years after he settled in England in 1231. His position in English society, it is true, was based on his successfully-pressed family claim to the earldom of Leicester. But in other respects, his dazzling rise to prominence seemed typical of that group of royal confidants, many of them aliens, to whom Henry entrusted the conduct of affairs after 1234. Simon was a particularly personable young man and the royal favours that showered on him culminated in the gift of the king's sister Eleanor, whom Simon secretly married in 1238. The outburst of anger this event produced amongst the general body of English magnates is not to be wondered at for Eleanor was one of the wealthiest matches in the country and her children would stand close in succession to the throne. Yet Henry had taken the important step of arranging her marriage without consulting the king's traditional counsellors.

20

Many years elapsed before Simon lived down these controversial early years. Nevertheless, it soon appeared that both in temperament and outlook he was quite unlike the king's other advisers. He was no royal sycophant. Indeed, the characters of the king and his brother-in-law were so different that quarrels were inevitable. Henry, at heart, was amiable, pious, and artistic. But his temper and judgement were notoriously erratic. He possessed few political gifts, and his incapacity to foresee results, for example in his ill-fated French campaign of 1242, left him open to derisive criticism. Simon was not slow to indulge in it. He matured into a proud, arrogant man, with a keen sardonic mind. He was sure of his own judgement and made no concessions to the desire to please. His extensive travels on crusade in 1240-42 widened his experience and confirmed his self-confidence. Now possessed of a European reputation as a man of action, Simon was more impatient than ever of Henry's lack of martial qualities and his failures of leadership. His impetuous tongue led him into public quarrels with the king which were acrimonious even by the standards of the day.

These bouts of antagonism were made more acute by purely personal differences which at times led each man to doubt the other's word. Simon claimed that he had not received justice from the king in the settlement of claims arising from his wife's dower. His demands were not unjustified, but he pressed them in the most importunate manner. Henry, his annoyance sharpened by impecuniosity, concluded that his brother-in-law, with rank ingratitude, would use any opportunity to further his own interests.

Despite frequent disputes, a final quarrel was long delayed. Henry, though irritated by Simon's truculence, still found his ability, vigour, and experience of great help in the conduct of affairs. Simon, in spite of annoyance at his shabby treatment and grave doubts about Henry's capacity to govern, supported the king during the baronial crisis of 1244. Restlessly, he sought new outlets for his ambition. In 1248 he accepted the king's commission to pacify the rebellious province of Gascony. He set about the task with single-minded determination and repressed his opponents with a ferocity that again revealed his autocratic temper. Supremely confident of his own uprightness, he invariably dismissed his adversaries as selfish and treacherous.

21

Complaints about Simon's arbitrary conduct poured in to Henry, who was becoming uneasy about the earl's semi-independent position. In 1252 the king set up a commission to investigate his rule in Gascony and opened the proceedings with a violent condemnation of his brother-in-law. But the earl was no longer the isolated alien, precariously dependent on royal goodwill, that he had been a decade earlier. Simon's improved standing in English society owed much to his increasing reliance on the support and counsel of several leading churchmen, notably the great Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln. The earl was unusually interested in religious matters and his conventional piety was reinforced by a desire to emulate his father, who had fought the Albigensian heretics. The clerics in Simon's circle were firm upholders of the pastoral ideal and vigorous defenders of ecclesiastical immunities. They resented Henry's interference in episcopal elections and objected to the pope's appointment of unsuitable foreigners to English benefices, and some were soon to protest at the burden of papal taxation levied on the Church. Finding Simon responsive to their advice, his clerical friends hoped to harness his reputation and experience to their cause.

The barons, moreover, had found new enemies. These were the Lusignan half-brothers of the king, whose irresponsible conduct since their arrival in England in 1247 had provoked much resentment. No wonder then that during Simon's trial in 1252, the other magnates, hitherto hostile, rallied to his aid. But though Simon was vindicated and his quarrel with the king again smoothed over, both Henry and Simon later admitted that the irreparable breakdown in mutual confidence dated from their dispute over Gascon affairs. Henceforth, Simon was not only outspokenly critical of the king but engaged in an increasingly vicious quarrel with the Lusignans.

After 1257 Simon was kept busy in France negotiating a final peace with Louis IX, but his absence from England made no difference to the mounting political crisis. The magnates were deeply concerned at the way Henry was exercising his power. They accepted that it was the king's responsibility to govern, yet they wished to make him responsive to their collective judgement in order to prevent him engaging in schemes of which they disapproved. The collapse of Henry's ill-conceived attempt to secure the throne of Sicily for his second son Edmund

obliged them to act. In 1258 they forced the Lusignan favourites into exile and established a new form of government by a plan of reform called the Provisions of Oxford. A Council of Fifteen was set up to control the king's actions and to consult three times a year with a committee of twelve magnates in parliament. Sheriffs were henceforth to be landowners in the counties they administered, and there was to be a comprehensive inquiry into all allegations of official misconduct. The magnates intended to rule for a dozen years evidently hoping that by 1270 Henry would be dead and normal relations could be re-established with his successor on the basis of friendly collaboration.

Simon cannot have played a leading part in drafting the baronial reforms. For most of the crucial period he was in France attending to the negotiations with Louis IX. Nevertheless, all the chroniclers include him in their lists of baronial leaders, and he was named a member of the committee which drew up the Provisions as well as being appointed to the Council of Fifteen. Moreover, the king was plainly frightened of him. In July, 1258, when sheltering from a thunderstorm, Henry blurted out to Simon that much as he dreaded lightning he feared the earl even more. The king had good reason to believe Simon was his most implacable opponent. The earl had already been foremost in hounding the Lusignans out of the country and early in 1260 he not only insisted that parliament should meet at the times stipulated in the Provisions, whether or not the king was present, but also tried to obstruct the dispatch of funds to the king, who was then in France. With aggressive assurance, Simon demanded the most rigorous baronial supervision of the king. His zeal gave the impression that he was engaged in a crusade against double-dealing which it would be dishonourable to abandon.

The new government ended the Sicilian entanglement, and made many important changes in law and administration in the Provisions of Westminster, published in 1259. But the baronial movement had united the king's opponents only by concealing their differences. As soon as common objectives had been achieved, old jealousies reasserted themselves. Simon was especially mistrusted. His insistence on his own interpretation of the Provisions of Oxford and the way he delayed ratification of the settlement with Louis IX until his wife's claims on Henry

had been satisfied, made it appear that he was trying to use the machinery set up in 1258 to impose his views on king and magnates alike. These suspicions were intensified when Simon came to a private understanding with the heir apparent, the Lord Edward, who had quarrelled with his father. Meanwhile, the king manoeuvred to escape the unwelcome controls imposed on him. He was supported by the papacy and had the advantage of pursuing a single line of policy against his divided opponents. By 1262 the baronial movement was in ruins and Simon had to take refuge in France.

Henry was unable to follow up his advantage. He tactlessly offended the young earl of Gloucester, and Edward, again reconciled with his father, quarrelled violently with some Marcher barons. As public order collapsed, other discontented elements joined in. In several counties, knights set up local men as sheriffs in conformity with the Provisions of Oxford, and in London a rising tide of social revolution threatened to sweep away the ruling oligarchy of rich merchants. Then an influential body of leading churchmen came out strongly in favour of the Provisions. Half of the English episcopate had changed between 1258 and 1263, and under the direction of the new church leaders the earlier acquiescence in royal policies had given place to opposition to Henry's resumption of unrestricted power. In April, 1263, Simon returned to England and rallied these different elements behind him with a demand for a return to the Provisions. Although the baronial party was only a shadow of its former self, Simon was now its unchallenged head, his leadership all the more acceptable because of his reputation as an able warrior.

He forced the king to submit again to baronial control, but though his position seemed unassailable, his support was already dwindling. Simon sought the arbitration of Louis IX in the hope of vindicating his actions. Instead, in the Mise of Amiens in January, 1264, Louis categorically denounced the Provisions. The result was war. By shrewd strategy and bold leadership Simon defeated and captured King Henry and Edward at Lewes on 14th May, 1264.

Simon's downfall can be said to have begun with the battle of Lewes, paradoxically his greatest triumph. He had engaged in a traitorous war against his king and henceforth England lived under constant threat of invasion by loyalists who had

fled to the Continent. To meet this dangerous situation, power was concentrated in the hands of a small group of Simon's leading supporters. The new scheme of government provided for three electors, one of whom was Simon, to choose a council of nine to control the king. In return for their support, the prelates were helped in their efforts to restore order in the Church, and one bishop, Stephen Berksted of Chichester, was made a member of the triumvirate. These and other measures were solemnly confirmed in parliaments in June, 1264, and January, 1265. To both these assemblies, Simon summoned knights to represent the counties; to the second, he added burgesses from a number of towns.

Simon had led the baronial party into an impossible position. Henry refused to co-operate with the new government. And since Edward now hated his uncle, there was no hope of resolving the problem by deposing Henry in favour of his son. Instead of collective control there had emerged the rule of a single over-mighty subject. More forceful and experienced than his colleagues, Simon unavoidably dominated the conduct of government. In these circumstances, all negotiations for a permanent settlement were doomed to failure. Meanwhile, Simon was tightening his grip on affairs. In August, 1264, he extended the rule of the new government for an unspecified period into the reign of Henry's successor; and by taking possession of Edward's palatinate of Chester in March, 1265, he secured a dominant position in the Welsh Marches. Not content with this, Simon even made inquiries about his own rights and functions as hereditary royal steward, which confirmed the suspicion that he was seeking any pretext to perpetuate his power.

Simon could not legitimize his authority, nor would he surrender it without a fight. Inevitably, his supporters found his dominance increasingly irksome, while his obstinacy seemed to them the chief obstacle to the re-establishment of harmony with the king. Early in 1265, amidst growing discontent, the earl of Gloucester, the third member of the triumvirate, took the lead in denouncing Simon's monopoly of authority. Then Edward escaped from custody, put himself at the head of the swelling number of Henry's supporters, and defeated and killed Simon at the battle of Evesham on 4th August, 1265.

(b)

The struggles for power between the supporters and opponents of Henry III exposed several areas of conflict in contemporary society: there were county knights seeking improvements in the law, the reform of abuses, and the control of local affairs by local men; clerics striving to resist royal and papal interference in their affairs; and middle elements in the towns struggling to overthrow the oligarchies of rich merchants. Moreover, the barons' programme of reform in 1258-59 contained benefits for classes other than their own, and the attack on abuses was pressed forward with exceptional vigour. But concern for these reforms was neither the essential feature of baronial plans nor the exclusive prerogative of the magnates. It was merely another aspect of their assumption of royal responsibilities. It no more made the barons progressive than the same duty had made the king liberal. Nor was there any real alliance of the various elements struggling to assert themselves; their interests were not merely divergent but even incompatible. In fact, the crucial struggles over control of the king impinged only intermittently and haphazardly, though at times decisively, on the other conflicts.

The magnates intervened against Henry in 1258 to curb the king's misgovernment and to reassert their position in society. To achieve these ends they enforced the practice of consultation with the king on all matters of importance. But their actions were not inspired by lofty constitutional principles. The magnates acted to solve the problems created by an irresponsible and extravagant king, and the machinery set up to regulate his actions was an improvised response to a temporary crisis. The divisions that eventually wrecked baronial unity were the result, for the most part, of personal feuds and disagreements; they cannot be elevated into clashes of principle.

Only against this political background can we give depth and conviction to our estimate of Simon's career. The earl, it can be safely concluded, had no new principles of statecraft or enlightened political aims. He accepted unquestioningly the social order of his day and most of his views were habitual to his class. Although Simon supported the knights in their claim to choose their own sheriffs, he showed no willingness to share power with them. On the contrary, after Lewes, he transferred

many of the sheriffs' most important powers to keepers of the peace chosen by and responsible only to himself. Nor is there any evidence that Simon interfered in the towns on behalf of any one social group. The situation in London, where the revolutionary populace supported Simon, was the exception rather than the rule in English towns. The other towns that co-operated with Simon after the battle of Lewes did so under the leadership of their old ruling oligarchies, and at Bury St. Edmunds the pro-Montfortian burgesses actually suppressed a popular movement amongst the lower townspeople. In other words, the amount of support Simon received from the towns did not depend on the degree to which rebellious citizens succeeded in overthrowing the oligarchies. Without doctrinaire views, Simon took his support from wherever he could find it.

Victorian historians plucked consolation from the defeat of their hero. They transferred their allegiance from Simon to Edward, the man largely responsible for his destruction, by envisaging Edward as his uncle's political heir. Edward, they argued, was so impressed by Simon's representative parliament that, when he ascended the throne, he gave it a permanent place in his scheme of government. This idea had a powerful attraction for historians anxious to demonstrate the continuity of English history. Nevertheless, such a belief is mistaken. Simon's most novel idea was his view that parliament could meet in the king's absence and in face of his express prohibition. This notion, rejected by Henry, did not survive the earl's death. On the other hand, Simon's resolve to call representatives of the knights and burgesses to parliament does not warrant his being considered exceptionally perceptive. The practice of requiring the attendance of knights and burgesses before the king and his council was long established, though the parliament of January, 1265, was the first occasion that they were summoned simultaneously. Nor was Simon's decision a deliberate act of statesmanship intended to share authority with new classes. Simon needed a solemn recognition of his government by as imposing a gathering as possible. Thus the assembly of 1265 was closer in character to that of 1273, which took an oath of fealty to Edward I, than to ordinary parliaments. Propaganda not power was the question at issue and, as the preparations for the abortive parliament of June, 1265, demonstrate, Simon omitted the knights and burgesses when

circumstances changed. Edward, in his turn, called parliaments of varied composition to meet different needs and situations. At most, Simon's parliaments reinforced other aspects of the period of reform and rebellion in underlining the growing importance of the country gentry. After 1265 it became usual to include representatives of the shires in parliaments wherein some kind of taxation was proposed. Even so Edward was a more successful king than his father, not on account of lessons learnt from his uncle's rebellion, but because his vigorous leadership came closer to satisfying the baronial ideal of kingship.

Simon's career is less of a puzzle if we abandon the view that the self-seeking adventurer of the 1230's evolved into an enlightened altruistic reformer thirty years later. In fact, Simon's temper remained remarkably consistent and recalls both his fanatical father and his turbulent sons. Simon's preoccupation with personal advancement; his complete confidence in his own uprightness; his capacity for violence; his exasperation with, and domineering attitude towards, the king; his deference to clerics, the only people able to influence him: these characteristics recur throughout his career. It was not Simon so much as the times that changed.

The ardour with which Simon urged the enforcement of the Provisions of Oxford cannot be taken at face value. He had played no decisive part in drawing up or applying the baronial reforms; towards his colleagues in the baronial government he was obstructive and factious. His intervention in English affairs in 1263 was opportunist. He used the disturbances of that year, which were largely unconnected with the Provisions of Oxford, to seize control of the government. His rejection of Louis IX's award ill accords with his castigation of Henry's faithlessness. After Lewes he exercised the unrestrained power that he had denied the king and by setting no time limit to the operation of his provisional government, he disclosed himself as concerned primarily with the continuance of his own authority. It is hard to resist the conclusion that Simon's political principles were a rationalization of his prejudices. Having suffered deeply and repeatedly from Henry's incapacity and unreliability, Simon joined in the baronial attempts to curb the king's misgovernment in the hope of ensuring for himself the deciding voice in affairs his ambition demanded.

Simon's terrific impact upon his contemporaries can be traced to two sources: his personality, and his close harmony with certain sections of the clergy. Simon's leadership displays areas of political blindness if not a serious lack of political judgement. The clumsy way he handled affairs in Gascony was a foretaste of mistakes a decade later. His incessant quarrels with other magnates reveal his fatal incapacity in handling the personal relations which constituted so much of the politics of the time. His readiness to agree to Louis IX's arbitration, knowing that king's high regard for monarchy, betokens either the desperate gamble of declining fortunes or the folly of an over-confident man. Simon's political leadership was a succession of blunders redeemed by a single battle. Yet force of personality enabled him to surmount his difficulties. Bold, courageous, intolerant, and unrestrained by feelings of humility and self-criticism, Simon pursued his quest for power with boundless self-confidence. The peculiar intensity of his outlook attracted many of the younger magnates, untried in policy and deficient in experience. But it was temper, not political principle that made him the leader of a rebellion against the king.

Simon had another source of strength: the active support of many churchmen. They were not a long-established group of political reformers any more than Grosseteste was the baronial theoretician. Their primary aims were the defence of clerical privilege and the desire for a royal government which would protect the Church and actively further ecclesiastical reform. They welcomed the Provisions of Oxford not so much as a means of compelling Henry III to listen to his barons' advice, but as imposing on him policies and standards of behaviour most likely to further their own objectives. When Simon, already a long-standing friend of some of them, became the leading advocate of close control of the king and showed willingness to restore them to their traditional place in royal counsels, these clerics had every inducement to support him. Their tactful mediation and skill, when required, in presenting the case against the king was of great value to Simon. Sympathetic chroniclers provided much needed propaganda for his cause. In their hands, Simon's career became a life of heroic virtue. After his death, his struggle was compared with Becket's as leading with inexorable logic to its predestined fulfilment. The myth of Simon de Montfort was born.

Simon was neither the founder of the House of Commons, nor the inaugurator of responsible government, nor in any political sense an earlier incarnation of ourselves. But if he was, after all, a man of his time and place, his masterful personality and dramatic career ensure that we cannot deny him, in Sir Maurice Powicke's words, a certain 'murky greatness'.

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